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Otto Schneid

THE FIRST AMERICANS ARE ALIVE !

At school, we learned that there were only a few American Indians left, and these have no hope for the future: that they cannot maintain their heritage, which is slipping from their hands because of their harsh living conditions.

How much truth is in this opinion and what are the facts today, this we learned at the Indian meeting from which my son Jacob and I have just returned.

This assembly was the first in 208 years, and there met representatives of tribes from the whole of North America, from Canada to Mexico; one man even represented a Peruvian tribe. To Wyalusing Rocks, the breath-taking landscape in Pennsylvania, came about five hundred delegates, including chiefs, high priests and princes; among these leaders stood out a fine old lady, Mrs. Wilbur. In order to see them and to enjoy their dances and games, a 70.000 "palefaces" came in their cars, which blocked the neighboring highways. The State Police mobilized all its forces to control the traffic jams that occured.

And so, the American Indians didn't pass out of existence altogether. The very fact of that meeting proves that they want to go on living.

Did it ever happen that a people committed suicide ? Did any racial, national or social group ever do that ? The extreme and comprehensive assimilation confronted the Jewish people with such a question before the rise of the Zionism. Many survivors formed so wrong a conclusion also from the Disaster, as, e.g., all the baptized Jews who afterwards were in a position to return to their people and failed to do so.

The American Indians lived for many generations in complete des air, without hope, between sword and starvation. In this condition it seemed that only a few of them will be able to escape the collective fate. In many American towns you can find men and women strikingly similar to Amer Indians: they remind us baptized Jews or descendents of our Marranos, for only racial features betray their origin.

Everywhere you also find people of mixed blood. After an awful series of wars, robberies and extermination of whole tribes and minimization of others, the stealing away of their land continued to lessen the number of the Indians. In addition to the most miserable conditions of life as a result from the loss of their lands, the Indian peoples suffered terribly from the dishonesty of the White Man who violated even the terms of treatises that he himself had forced on the victims.

Since the First Americans buried the war tomahawk, more than 200 years ago, their condition wasn't bettered as they had hoped. Their bitter complaints, both old and recent, remind us of many of our own memories, of old scars as well as of fresh wounds.

The half million Indians still living in our time are going to make a historic move : To appeal to the conscience of America of today, or to that of the World. They believe in conscience, because they have no other way.

We vegetarians can't help seeing everything with eyes of vegetarians. While wearing shoes not made of leather, we talk in the spirit of sincere friendship with men wearing skins and furs, adorned with feathers and nails. We must, however, distinguish between good and bad and be just even when it is hard. We have to fight any butchering , hunting or fishing as a game or sport of those who can exist without it. But what could do these oppressed ones whose lands were so cruelly taken away, if their hunting and fishing were forbidden by any principle ?

In the restaurant of Nyalusing we had dinner with one of the few wealthy ones among them. He is the chief of the Tuscaroras, 83, called Loud Voice, and has an English name, too. In his face are majesty and spirituality. He ordered a meat dish, we ordered salad. When he heard that we are vegetarians, he commented: "This is a very, very, very good principle." This man could never be untrue: the little that he sais expresses his opinions with utmost honesty. Thus such a heartfelt agreement from a man who spent necessarily all

of his life in a meat-eating world, touched our hearts. This broad -minded personality has seen most continents and peoples . Altough he absorbed much of their cultures, he dedicated his life to his own people. We met his daughter, too, a college graduate and teacher in New York state, and his son, also a devoted leader of his tribe. The old man is a lover of Israel, and in this he is obviously also pefectly sincere.

That we talked with these thinking men, touched, of course, also burning questions, as the Negro rights movement. All the Indians showed understood sympathy, but didn't agree with the Negroes' methods. The Indians don't want to attain their rights by force. They decided to achieve their aims by the way of understanding, honor and peace. All of them insist that honesty is the best policy, as if they adopted the supreme moral, that of Ghandi. Or is it a result of the terrible lesson that History has taught them during 400 years ?

Among the leaders I remember with respect and sympathy, is Lightfoot Talking Eagle who gave us a most competent explanation of their real faith. They worship God and agree to call the Supreme by this name, but they prefer their own name The Great Spirit. Nature and all its expressions and all that is adorable in it stems from this highest principle. It also gives man wisdom and leads him. Everything belongs to the Great Spirit, the Indians are Its People and It will liberate them. These sayings sound familiar to us. It is hard to say if they are only a reconstruction of originally ancient American beliefs, or a development influenced by the oldest monotheism, that could get to them directly from Judaism or through Christianity. (Let us mention that also the Hinduism took a similar direction in our time.) The enthusiasm of Lightfoot is convincing as are the expressions of anybody who is full of his faith.

Another Indian chief (Bright Cance) who lives in a small town of New York state, supported actively the United Jewish Appeal and succeeded with the help of Christian friends in collecting 200.000 $. Great is the power of friendship; sooner or later it is bound to bear fruits.

One more development is evident, but it comes tragically late. Until now, American Indians had no national awareness. Today they are beginning to abandon the each-tribe-for-itself-attitude. Correlations between the shattered remains are just now becoming firm.

Finally, let me note something typical of our time. At a performance of traditional dances, the speaker told about one of the dancers who looked in his tribal dress adequately, that he is not an Indian. One of the tribes accepted him as a brother, and he got also an Indian name. I had no chance to talk to him, but heared that there were others like him. This also reminds of a remarkable trend in modern Jewish history. The power by which a suffering people attracts individuals of big and proud nations, might point to a close revival, to a better tomorrow.

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